

# The Imperious Duty to Remember. The Uncompromising Testimony of Jean-Baptiste Hategeka, Priest and Theologian, Survivor of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Nyundo

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## Abstract

In December 1994, five months after the conclusion of the genocide against the Tutsi during which up to a million of Tutsi and Hutu trying to protect them were assassinated, Jean-Baptiste Hategeka, the vicar general of the diocese of Nyundo in western Rwanda, one of few Tutsi priests who survived the massacre, published a book entitled *Raisins verts pour dents agacées. Cris contre les nazis noirs au Rwanda* (Sour grapes for irritated teeth. Cry against the Black Nazis in Rwanda). Self-published in Italy, where the author was receiving care after the genocide, this work had a limited distribution. The article argues on the basis of oral history interviews and original documents that it deserves wider recognition for two reasons. The first is that, written during the genocide against the Tutsi and immediately afterwards, it may be the account of the tragedy ever published in the form of a book. It brings new knowledge on genocide in Nyundo, an area targeted by the *génocidaires* at the onset of the genocide. Hategeka saw eight priests and a few religious sisters being killed in front of him in the bishop's house on 9 April. He then lived in hiding with the bishop of Nyundo and a few other priests until mid-June, before escaping to Goma. The second reason is the depth and insightfulness of the political, philosophical, theological, and spiritual reflections Hategeka shared in the book. A committed Christian, he interrogates the silence of God and the meaning of faith in the middle of the genocide. He advocates for the “imperious duty to remember” and questions the ambiguity, if not outright complicity, of some sectors of the Rwandan Catholic Church. *Raisins verts* is an important source for the history of the Christian response to the genocide.



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No fewer than 32 priests, nearly all Tutsi<sup>1</sup>—out of a total of 56 present in the diocese when the genocide broke out<sup>2</sup>—were assassinated in the Catholic diocese of Nyundo, western Rwanda, in April and May 1994. Preceded by the distribution of weapons to civilians by the army and a first wave of massacres, the systematic extermination of the Tutsi population started in Nyundo and the neighbouring localities in the morning of April 7, a few hours after the shooting down of President Habyarimana's plane, the event used as a pretext for the onslaught. It continued the following days. Religious sisters and lay brothers were also murdered. The minor seminary, the bishops' house and the cathedral, which was attacked twice, were the main sites of the genocide in Nyundo, a locality close to Gisenyi and, across the border, to Goma, in current-day DRC.

In a mere three months, an estimated 1 000 000 people were killed in Rwanda for the only reason that they were categorised as Tutsi or took the defence of Tutsi people at risk of being killed. Most were non-combatants. They were accused—without any proof—of being accomplices of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, an armed rebellion of Tutsi refugees. Nyundo is the Catholic diocese which paid the heaviest toll to the genocide.<sup>3</sup> In December 1994, Jean-Baptiste Hategeka, one of the few Tutsi priests who survived, sent to the printing firm Golinelli in Formigine, Modena, where he had resettled for reasons of health after the genocide, a 63-page volume called *Raisins verts pour dents agacées. Cri contre les nazis noirs du Rwanda* (Sour grapes for irritated teeth. Cry against the black Nazis in Rwanda).<sup>4</sup> The title alludes to the transgenerational transmission of the stereotypes associated with the Hutu-Tutsi binary, in reference to a Jewish proverb commented in Ezekiel 18, 2–4. Self-published in a small Italian town

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1 Recoudre les déchirures. Une interview de Mgr Kalibushi en exil aux Pays-Bas », *L'Actualité religieuse dans le monde*, n° 125, 15 septembre 1994, p. 10. The nominative most published by Agenzia Fides under the title “Le martyrologe de l’Église du Rwanda en 1994” (Rome, 6 April 2004) lists 31 priests from the Nyundo diocese.

2 Des rescapés du diocèse de Nyundo témoignent’, *Dialogue*, 177 (August-September 1994), 68. In the interview mentioned above, Wenceslas Kalibushi, the bishop of Nyundo, indicated that the diocese numbered 70 priests before the genocide. This figure probably includes priests residing outside Rwanda in 1994. Kalibushi mentioned that two priests killed during the genocide were Hutu.

3 There is an abundant literature, predominantly in French, on the genocide against the Tutsi. The studies published in English include: Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis History of the Genocide. History of the Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998); Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers. Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Erin Jessee, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda. The Politics of History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Klaus Bachmann, *A History of Rwanda. From the Monarchy to Post-Genocidal Justice* (New-York: Routledge, 2023), 171–228.

4 Jean-Baptiste Hategeka., *Raisins verts pour dents agacées. Cris contre les nazis noirs du Rwanda* (Formigine: Golinelli, 1994). Italian translation, 1996.

with no marketing efforts, this small volume has escaped the attention of journalists, publicists, historians, and theologians interested in the genocide against the Tutsi despite its considerable historical, philosophical, and theological interest. Christian Terras, the editor of *Golias*, a French progressive Catholic magazine, published extracts of the book in 1996 but without indicating its title nor purchasing instructions.<sup>5</sup>

I found reference to it by chance when deciphering the minutes of the 2010 *gacaca* trial of Gabriel Maindron, a French priest from the diocese of Nyundo accused of genocide complicity by the Rwandan government, whose story I was investigating.<sup>6</sup> I had read Hategeka's story in *Golias*. After searching in vain in various libraries, I was fortunate enough to obtain a copy of this rare book from the hands of the Rwandan author, Jean Ndorimana, a friend of Hategeka's, who had spent time in Italy in the late 1990s and had also published on the genocide.

## A First-hand Account of the Genocide against the Tutsi in Nyundo

My purpose in this article is to draw attention to the importance of Hategeka's first-hand account of the terrible events he witnessed in Nyundo for a history of the genocide in general and of the Christian response to the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda in particular.<sup>7</sup> *Raisins verts* deserves to be drawn from oblivion for at least two reasons. The first is that, according to the current state of research, it appears to be the earliest testimony from a genocide survivor that has ever gone to press. Part of it was written during the genocide itself and the rest immediately after. Yolande Mukagasana's well-known testimony, *La mort ne veut pas de moi* (Not My Time to Die),<sup>8</sup> for example, was published in April 1997. In a bibliographical survey published in 1997, Jean-Pierre Chrétien listed 11 books dated 1994 on the genocide. Most were from journalists, scholars, and development workers who were not in Rwanda between April and July 1994, the three months of the genocide. Only three provided first-hand information on the genocide, but their authors—African Rights, a British-based human rights organisation which started to collect information in June 1994; Michel Sounalet, a French activist who cared for orphaned children in Kigali in June 1994; and a congregation of Spanish Catholic sisters, the Misioneras de Jesus, Maria y Jose, who witnessed the genocide in April 1994 in their mission of Congo-Nil in western Rwanda before returning to their country<sup>9</sup>—had not been personally at risk. Hategeka was a real survivor. He saw eight fellow priests and three sisters dying in front of him in the attack

5 “Ukuze inkuba, arayiganira!”. Il faut survivre pour le raconter ou celui qui a échappé à la foule en parle’, *Golias*, 48-49 (Summer 1996), 124–127.

6 Philippe Denis, *The Genocide against the Tutsi and the Rwandan Churches: Between Grief and Denial*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2022), 235, 246.

7 On the Christian response to the genocide against the Tutsi, see also Carol Rittner, John, K. Roth and Wendy Whitworth (eds), *Genocide in Rwanda. Complicity of the Churches ?* (St Louis, Minnesota : Paragon House, 2004).

8 Yolande Mukagasana, *La mort ne veut pas de moi*, Paris, Fixot, 1997. English translation: *Not My Time to Die: A Testimony* (Kigali: Huza Press, 2019).

9 Jean-Pierre Chrétien, ‘Interprétations du génocide dans l’histoire contemporaine du Rwanda’, *Clio en Afrique*, 2 (Summer 1997), Notes 3, 9 and 10.

against the bishop's house of Nyundo on 9 April. He managed to flee with eleven others<sup>10</sup> and lived in hiding in Gisenyi until 19 June 2024.

*Raisins verts* is not the only source on the genocide in Nyundo. Some information on the genocide in Nyundo had already been shared in the August-September 1984 issue of *Dialogue*, a Rwandan Catholic magazine then based in Brussels. The authors of the article introduced themselves as “priests of the diocese of Nyundo.”<sup>11</sup> Hagegeka was one of them. About the same time, the French Catholic magazine, *L'actualité religieuse dans le monde*, published an interview with Wenceslas Kalibushi, the bishop of Nyundo, who had been brought by militiamen close to a grave to be shot there when the military commander of Gisenyi, on orders from Kigali, asked them to spare his life.<sup>12</sup> In 2018, Félicité Lyamakuru, a genocide survivor resettled in Belgium, told the story of her memory journey to Nyundo, where her family had been slaughtered when she was 16 years old. She was one of the few who survived the massacre perpetrated on the evening of 7 April in the minor seminary of Nyundo, where about 50 Tutsi refugees had taken refuge.<sup>13</sup>

### The Events of 7–9 April 1994 and their Aftermath<sup>14</sup>

*Raisins verts* adds to our knowledge of the genocide in Nyundo. It describes with harrowing details the attacks led on 7, 8, and 9 April 1994 by government-backed Interahamwe and blood-thirsty followers against more than 500 Tutsi who had found shelter in the bishop's house and the adjacent cathedral on top of a hill in Nyundo.<sup>15</sup> At first, they resisted with stones, but they could not do much when, after two days of siege, the assailants received weapons from the authorities. Nearly all the refugees in the bishop's house were murdered, their bodies thrown into latrines. The refugees in the cathedral were spared on that day, but the killers came back three weeks later and killed them all. Hagegeka and his confrere, Callixte Kalisa, were prepared for martyrdom and wore, we read in *Raisins verts*, their best clothes for the occasion. Kalisa lost his life but not Hagegeka. “Kneeling down in this elegant attire in front of the Holy Sacrament, a stone in hand,” the latter wrote, “I was determined to confront death without trembling.”<sup>16</sup>

*Raisins verts* also describes the life of the surviving priests and the bishop in hiding. Against all odds, they managed to leave the bishop's house on 10 April under the

10 Hagegeka, *Raisins verts*, 28.

11 Des rescapés du diocèse de Nyundo témoignent » 59–68.

12 ‘Recoudre les déchirures. Une interview de Mgr Wenceslas Kalibushi, évêque rwandais en exil aux Pays-Bas’, *L'Actualité religieuse dans le monde*, 125 (15 September 1994), 10-12.

13 Félicité Lyamakuru, *L'ouragan a frappé Nyundo* (Mons : Éditions du Cerisier, 2018).

14 My main source for this section is a succession of interviews with Fabien Rwakareke, a Catholic priest who shared the fate of Jean-Baptiste Hagegeka in Nyundo and Gisenyi during the genocide. I interviewed him on three occasions, the last time being on 1 April 2024 in Gisenyi.

15 Some of these refugees had arrived during a previous wave of massacres the year before. Abbé Fabien Rwakareke identified 342 of them in April 1993. Others arrived on 7 April 1994. Mail from Abbé Fabien Rakwareke to the author, Gisenyi, 3 February 2025.

16 Hagegeka, *Raisins verts*, 56.

protection of government officials, the same ones who had allowed the massacre to happen without intervening. They stayed in Hôtel Méridien Izuba, a luxury hotel along the Kivu Lake, in Gisenyi for a day or two without food before moving to the nearby house of an employee of the diocese, whose key the bishop possessed by luck. They remained in this shelter for more than two months, with church members such as Anathalie Icyimpaye and Boniface Ndalifite bringing food in secret, to the peril of their lives.<sup>17</sup> The unexpected visit of the Red Cross on 31 May gave them some hope.<sup>18</sup> On 19 June, the nunciature of Burundi obtained their release in exchange for a considerable amount of money—15 000 to 50 000 Rwandan francs per head—and they escaped without harm to Goma, across the Zairian border.<sup>19</sup> Anatole Nsengiyumva, the military commander who had interrupted the bishop's slaughter on 7 April, was present.<sup>20</sup> In Goma, the 10 or so surviving priests found refuge in the house of the local bishop, Faustin Ngabu, until the end of the genocide. In late July 1994, some friends managed to send them to a house of the Emmanuel Community in Helvoirt, in the Netherlands, where they recovered from the trauma of the genocide.<sup>21</sup> Hagegeka, who suffered from diabetes, remained behind and resettled in Italy. He became part of the pastoral team of Formigine near Modena at the invitation of the bishop of Modena-Nonantela, who wrote the preface of an Italian translation of his book in 1996.<sup>22</sup> Having fallen sick again, he moved to Bergamo in northern Italy, where he had some friends, and from there to Gisenyi in Rwanda in 2006.<sup>23</sup> He lived there for a further 10 years, incapacitated but in good spirits.<sup>24</sup> He died on 3 March 2016.

### Hagegeka's Spiritual Reflections on the Genocide

*Raisins verts* is not only remarkable for the information it provides on the genocide in Nyundo. Equally striking is the profoundness of the reflections its author shares on his experience as a survivor. While in hiding and during his convalescence in the Netherlands and Italy, Hagegeka kept reflecting on what he had witnessed. He presented his thoughts as “meditations.” They form 32 short texts of one to three pages, preceded by an “Orientation” and concluded by a “Postface.” The book is divided into three sections, respectively entitled “Rébellion intérieure” (Interior rebellion), “La foi à l'épreuve” (The faith put to the test) and “Au fil du temps” (As time goes on).

From his own admission, Hagegeka started putting his thoughts on paper in May 1994, when the genocide was still in full swing. He continued the work while recovering from

17 Ibid., 49.

18 Ibid., 50.

19 Ibid., 39, 47.

20 One should not infer from this that Anatole Nsengiyumva was not involved in the genocide. He was condemned in appeal by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in 2011 to 15 years of imprisonment for having failed to protect the Tutsi population in Gisenyi.

21 Recoudre les déchirures', 10.

22 Jean-Baptiste Hagegeka, Uva acerba che allega i denti. Grido contro i nazisti Neri del Rwanda (Formigine: Golinelli, 1996).

23 Group interview with Isacco Spinelli and other priests and lay people from the Formigine parish, Formigine, province of Modena, 24 February 2024.

24 Callixte Kabayiza, interview conducted on 4 April 2025 in Kigali.

poor health in Europe. “Started during the month of May in reclusion,” he wrote in the postface, “these meditations went on as I pursued my peregrinations.”<sup>25</sup> The text abounds in references to authors such as the French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, the German rabbi Emil Fackenheim, the Italian writer Luciano de Crescenzo and the Belgian journalist Colette Braeckman. The latter’s pioneering account of the history of the genocide in Rwanda came out in December 1994,<sup>26</sup> just before Hategeka sent his manuscript to the printer.

Rather modestly, Hategeka asked the reader of his meditations “not to expect political science, nor history, nor sociology” in them. They “only relate to the grief, experienced as a deep shock, of the end of the values of hospitality in Rwanda.”<sup>27</sup> In fact, the author of *Raisins verts* did both: he wrote as a witness but also as an intellectual. Born in 1941 and ordained to the priesthood in 1970, he had taught at Nyakibanda Major Seminary in southern Rwanda from 1977 to 1979 before being appointed rector of St Pius X Minor Seminary in Nyundo. Sometime later, he went to Rome to complete a Master’s degree in theology. From 1977 to 1997, he served as vicar general of the diocese of Nyundo, nominally during the last three years since by then he resided in Italy. Before the genocide, he showed his interest in political matters by publishing three books on democracy and ethnic discrimination in Rwanda. He made reference to two of those—*Pions et roitelets : Phénoménologie de la domination* (1986) and *Stéthoscopes sur deux décennies au Rwanda* (1988)—in *Raisins verts*.<sup>28</sup>

The opening page of the volume illustrates Hategeka’s project. It features a quotation from a book published by the German-born Jewish rabbi and philosopher Emil Wackenheim on the duty of memory to the victims of the Holocaust. “In this night of the Seder [evening before Passover] we remember with veneration and love the six million members of our people of the European diaspora who perished in the hands of a tyrant more perverse than the pharaoh who reduced in slavery our fathers in Egypt.”<sup>29</sup> We should remember that in December 1994, when Hategeka sent the manuscript of his book to the printer, many church leaders and heads of international organisations hesitated to recognise the reality of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), which would formally establish that a genocide as defined by the 1948 United Nations Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide had taken place in Rwanda, had been established a month before. On 26 April 1994, the French historian Jean-Pierre Chrétien had caused sensation by describing the massacres in Rwanda as “un nazisme tropical” (a tropical Nazism) in the daily newspaper *Libération* but few authors had explored the

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25 Hategeka, *Raisins verts*, 62.

26 Colette Braeckman, *Rwanda : Histoire d’un génocide* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

27 Hategeka, *Raisins verts*, 62.

28 Ibid., 45.

29 Emil Wackenheim, *Penser après le Auschwitz* (Paris: Cerf, 1986), 164, quoted in Hategeka, *Raisins verts*, 3. Prefaced by the French theologian Bernard Dupuy, a specialist of the dialogue between Christianity and Judaism, this book is a compilation of three public lectures, translated into English, by Emil Wackenheim. The first was published in 1971 under the title *The Human Condition After Auschwitz: A Jewish Testimony a Generation After*.

analogy between the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide. This is what Hategeka did explicitly and intentionally in his book as the subtitle “Cry against the black Nazis of Rwanda” indicates.

The French version of Wackenheim’s work is entitled *Penser après Auschwitz* (Thinking after Auschwitz). Hategeka’s work could have been named *Penser après le génocide rwandais*. If Paul Ricoeur’s chef d’œuvre *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* (Memory, History, Forgetting), published in 2000, had been available, Hategeka would probably have quoted it. One of his “meditations” is dedicated to “Memory: an imperious duty.” Scandalised by the media coverage given to the plight of the cholera-stricken Hutu refugees in Goma, Hategeka claimed that the cold-blooded murder of hundreds of thousands of unarmed people killed because they were Tutsi should never be forgotten:

We have to cry out, shout from the rooftops, slap people if necessary, because everyone turns a deaf ear. Everyone is ready to take refuge in humanitarian generosity and belated avoidance strategies to distract minds from a more demanding justice. Who are the lucky recipients of the relief? Most of the beneficiaries are the camps of unrepentant murderers, who invaded *en masse* the countries bordering Rwanda. It is their tragedy which mobilized the world indifferent to their victims.<sup>30</sup>

Along the same lines, *Raisins verts* denounces the tendency among politicians, NGO workers, and Christian leaders to call for reconciliation without fully recognising the unspeakable reality of the genocide of the Tutsi. For Hategeka, this was mere cynicism:

They want to force the survivors into unconditional reconciliation with the murderers of their people. There is no more cynical method to dishonour the disappeared! Please, let us not try to drown the grief in champagne, by wrapping such a tragic cause in a total discourse. Nothing, not even the requested institution of an international court, will be able to punish a genocide so deprived of remorse. Can the disgusting injustice which has made so many disgusting people find an adequate reparation? Let us not try to accustom ourselves with the fate that engulfed them.<sup>31</sup>

The reconciliation Hategeka rejected was a reconciliation without remorse, not reconciliation as such. It required a full acknowledgement of the reality of the genocide, the opposite of the “amnesia” advocated by many politicians and church leaders in 1994. Forgiveness remained the goal, but in an intensely traumatic situation, that was a challenge:

A good policy for the city of the living must, of course, include forgiveness. But how can the dead forgive their murderers? The living themselves will not be able to avoid the conflict, they will simply drown it in entertainment and business dealings, to avoid poisoning their existence.<sup>32</sup>

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30 Hategeka, *Raisins verts*, 7.

31 Ibid., 7–8.

32 Ibid., 8.

## The Priests Who Failed to See the Genocide

Hagegeka's revolt did not spare the members of his own church. He did not condone the killings of three Catholic bishops, six priests, and a few lay people by soldiers of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi army which eventually stopped the genocide, on 5 June 1994 in Gakurazo near Byimana, at a short distance from Gitarama, the new seat of the government, but he showed no complacency towards the Rwandan bishops, gathered in Kabgayi, who had failed to condemn outright the actions of the interim government which had orchestrated the genocide against the Tutsi:

What should have been an honest conduct of the clergy? A clear disagreement and not an ambiguous attitude toward the criminal institution. A situation no doubt very sensitive for the hierarchy sheltered in Kabgayi, close to the government operating in Gitarama.<sup>33</sup>

The worst case of genocide denialism that *Raisins verts* documents, however, did not concern the Catholic Church of Rwanda as such but the diocese of Nyundo. When they were in hiding in Gisenyi, Hagegeka wrote, it was not the Interahamwe who inflicted on them the biggest pain but their fellow priests. On 30 May 1994, Gabriel Maindron, the parish priest of Congo-Nil near Kibuye, Jean-Baptiste Ntamugabumwe, a school principal close to the Hutu extremist circles, and Jean Ntirivamunda, a senior priest whose presence was required to legitimate the mission, went to see the bishop of Nyundo in his refuge of Gisenyi with the mission, in Hagegeka's words, "to impose on Bishop Kalibushi the opening of the parishes that he had not closed." They requested "the pastoral appointment of Hutu priests whose only quality was to be Hutu and maintenance budgets only for these pastors."<sup>34</sup>

Hagegeka reacted with outrage to his confreres' *business as usual* attitude. For them, the assassination of thirty priests in the diocese counted for nothing:

An unspeakable cynicism that the actors will probably not have noticed! A 'Church coup' against a bishop in disarray, telling him that life will continue without him! Our tragedy mattered so little to them: the dead were not to be mourned but to be replaced and forgotten.<sup>35</sup>

Fabien Rwakareke, one of the surviving priests in Gisenyi, also remembered the visit of Maindron and the two Hutu priests. "They were accompanied by an Interahamwe with a black beard. For them it was as if we were already dead!"<sup>36</sup>

33 Ibid., 51.

34 Hagegeka, *Raisins verts*, 49. The parishioners who had chased away or killed their priests in the diocese of Cyangugu also asked their bishop to appoint new priests, preferably Hutu. See Jean Ndorimana, *Rwanda. Idéologies, méthode et négationnisme du génocide des Tutsi à la lumière de la chronique de la région de Cyangugu*. Rome: Edizioni Vivere in, 2001), 81.

35 Hagegeka, *Raisins verts*, 49.

36 Abbé Fabien Rwakareke, interview conducted in Nyundo on 28 May 2018.

Hagegeka and his colleagues reacted with the same indignation to the letter which Maindron, another French priest and seven Hutu priests, including Ntilivamunda and Ntamugabumwe, addressed on 25 June 1994 in Kibuye to Cardinal Etchegaray, the president of the Pontifical Commission Justice and Peace, during the short visit he effected in Rwanda at Pope John-Paul II's request. The Polish pope is remembered for having been the first head of state to use the word "genocide" in a public statement, on 27 April 1994, three weeks after the onset of the Tutsi extermination programme.<sup>37</sup>

Maindron and his colleagues did not show any regret for the slaughter of their fellow priests and Tutsi parishioners. Instead, they complained about the destruction of church infrastructures and the difficulty of administering sacraments to the faithful. They attributed the "aggressiveness" of the Bahutus who attacked everything that was Tutsi, even religious without discernment' to the fact that "some priests and religious were accomplices of the RPF." They lamented the departure of the bishops and of the vicar general (Hagegeka) for Goma without mentioning that they had nearly died and that their lives and those of the other refugee priests had been heavily at risk in Gisenyi.<sup>38</sup>

It was too late to send a letter to Cardinal Etchegaray, who only made a brief visit to Goma on Sunday, 26 June, early in the morning.<sup>39</sup> Instead, the surviving priests opted to send, on Wednesday 29 June, an open letter to the priests from Kibuye. A copy of the document is included in *Raisins verts*.<sup>40</sup>

We thought that the assassination of your confrères would have caused some distress in you and that you did not want the few of them who survived to suffer the same fate. [...] We are horrified to see you talking [to Cardinal Etchegaray] about the 'disarray of the priests and laity' who deplore the lack of administration without worrying about the systematic extermination of a section of the population that includes many members of the body of Christ, especially in your zone of Kibuye. [...] In the circumstances that this country is going through the most urgent needs are the distribution of sacraments and the means of transport! [...] Did you not notice among the perpetrators of the horrors that you know 'practising' Christians and even 'community leaders'?<sup>41</sup>

The surviving priests then questioned the statement that some Tutsi priests were accomplices of the RPF. "Did you seriously verify the sources of this information before sharing them with the whole world since your message has been read in public?"<sup>42</sup> In conclusion, they expressed the wish to meet their contradicitors face to face. Their reaction should not be seen as a negative judgment but as a call to dialogue.

37 Denis, The Genocide against the Tutsi and the Rwandan churches, 96–98.

38 Jean Ntilivamunda, Gabriel Maindron and seven others to Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, [Kibuye, 25 June 1994] in Jean Ndorimana, *Rwanda: L'Église catholique dans le malaise. Symptômes et témoignages* (Rome : Edizioni Vivere In, 2001), 168–169.

39 Roger Etchegaray, *J'ai senti battre le cœur du monde. Conversations avec Bernard Lecomte* (Paris : Fayard, 2007), 243.

40 Hagegeka, *Raisins verts*, 19–22.

41 Ibid., 19–20.

42 Ibid., 21.

In a penetrating way, Hagegeka invoked the authority of Emmanuel Levinas to denounce Maindron and his confreres' astonishing lack of empathy and their endorsement, as he said, of the “official lie.” Spiritual life, the French philosopher explained, was about freeing oneself of the ego and finding God in the face of the other. War and politics, by contrast, negate alterity and exclude the third person. “As soon as the other looks at me in his pain, I can no longer blame him for it and minimise his suffering.” This is exactly what the signatories of the letter to Cardinal Etchegaray failed to do, Hagegeka pointed out. “With sorrow we had to conclude that our brothers had lost the sense of judgment and that they determined to survive, even by lying, in a world devoid of values.”<sup>43</sup>

## Looking at the Genocide against the Tutsi in a Historical Perspective

Hagegeka’s “meditations” can be classified into three categories. Some are reminiscences of the three horrible months of the genocide. We have already alluded to them. They describe the first attacks against the bishop’s house on 7 April, the massacre on 9 April, the hiding in Gisenyi, and the unexpected transfer to Goma on 19 June. Other “meditations” scattered throughout the book are of a historical and political nature. Hagegeka revisited the history of Rwanda in an attempt to explain the genocide. Colette Braeckman’s book on the genocide in Rwanda, which he read just before submitting his manuscript to the printer, helped him in this regard. The third category is made of philosophical and theological reflections: how to account for this horror? How to remain a believer in such devastating circumstances? Why did God remain silent?

On 30 April 1990, four months before Pope John Paul II’s visit to Rwanda, five priests from the diocese of Nyundo criticised, in a letter to the Catholic bishops of Rwanda, the latter’s failure to denounce the policy of ethnic equilibrium which imposed, under the pretext of respecting the rights of the “majority” (i.e. the Hutu), discriminatory measures in education and employment against the Tutsi. “Racism or racial discrimination is the project,” they argued, “while the policy of ethnic (or even regional) equilibrium is the means or the manner to reach this goal.” Instead of providing unconditional support to the Rwandan government, they added, the church should promote social justice. Access to education and employment should be based on merit and not on ethnic affiliation.<sup>44</sup>

Hagegeka was one of the signatories of this letter, together with Fabien Rwakareke, who spearheaded the reconstruction of the diocese after the genocide, and three Tutsi priests, including Callixte Kalisa, who were murdered in April 1994. Hagegeka may have been the main author of the document. He made exactly the same point in *Raisins verts*. Democracy, he argued, is not majority rule. It has to respect human rights. In a democratic regime, minorities may not suffer discrimination.

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43 Ibid., 17.

44 Augustin Ntagara, Callixte Kalisa, Jean-Baptiste Hagegeka, Fabien Rwakareke and Aloys Nzuramabé to the Catholic bishops, Nyundo, 30 April 1990, in Jean Ndorimana, *De la région des Grands Lacs au Vatican, Intrigues, scandales et idéologie du génocide au sein de la hiérarchie catholique* (Kigali: Imprimerie Prograph, 2008), 328–332.

Ultimately, he explained, the responsibility for the genocide lay with the Belgian colonial power even though nobody could have anticipated at the time the disaster that would happen later. By systematically opposing Hutu and Tutsi to each other, by using Tutsi people as *surveillants des corvées* (chore supervisors) in colonial times, by devolving, on the eve of independence, all power to the Hutu “majority” and by condoning, in 1959 and after, the first massacres of Tutsi, the Belgians created the conditions for an enduring ethnic polarisation:

The ethnic majority elevated to total power would rapidly obtain an independence that would clearly be unilateral. Tribalism was entrenched and would never cease taking roots for three decades.<sup>45</sup>

Hagegeka had hoped that President Juvénal Habyarimana’s promise to abandon ethnic discrimination when he seized power in 1973 would materialise. He still believed it could happen in 1988 when he was writing *Stéthoscope sur deux décennies au Rwanda*.<sup>46</sup> It is interesting to note that, during this period, he was on good terms with Théoneste Bagosora, one of the architects of the genocide, condemned as such by the ICTR. They were classmates at St Piux X Minor Seminary in Nyundo, as Bagosora explained during his trial. Hagegeka went to see him in Kigali to set up an old boys’ association in the minor seminary.<sup>47</sup> But things changed in the late 1980s. The rigidity of the Rwandan government’s position on ethnic matters was an unsurmountable obstacle to peace. Its persistent refusal to allow the Tutsi refugees from Uganda to return encouraged them to create an army and attack Rwanda on 1 October 1990. Since then, organised vengeance took place, Hagegeka explained, culminating in the genocide.<sup>48</sup>

Historically, the diocese of Nyundo, which was run by diocesan priests and not Missionaries of Africa, always had a high proportion of Tutsi priests. Its first bishop, Aloys Bigirumwami, appointed in 1952, and Wenceslas Kalibushi, both Tutsi, were less aligned with the Rwandan government’s positions than the other bishops. It was from Nyundo, as we have seen, that five priests challenged, on 30 April 1990, the Catholic hierarchy’s proximity with the government. In 1991, Kalibushi was the only bishop who protested when dozens of Bagogwe, the members of an ethnic group associated with the Tutsi, were massacred in north-western Rwanda.<sup>49</sup> In 1993, Kalibushi and a few priests from Gisenyi and Kibuye issued a letter criticising the government for distributing weapons to civilians.<sup>50</sup> All this explains why the diocese of Nyundo was known as “Tutsi stronghold,” in the words of a tract distributed in 1991,<sup>51</sup> why Nyundo became a target hours after the shooting down of President Habyarimana’s plane on 6 April and

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45 Hagegeka, *Raisins verts*, 11.

46 Ibid., 45.

47 ICTR 48-81T: *The Prosecutor of the Tribunal v. Théoneste Bagosora and others*, 25 October 2005.

48 Hagegeka, *Raisins verts*, 12.

49 Denis, The genocide against the Tutsi and the Rwandan churches, 45.

50 Ibid., 231.

51 ‘Des rescapés du diocèse de Nyundo témoignent’, 68.

why so many priests were murdered. The Gisenyi area was the stronghold of the *akazu*, a group of Hutu extremists gravitating around the president's family.

One of Hategeka's "meditations" is dedicated to the genocide in Kibuye, meticulously planned by the prefect Clement Kayishema, a medical doctor. In April 1994 alone, according to Philip Verwimp, 49 000 Tutsi were killed in the Kibuye prefecture, in the parish church and the Gatwaro stadium in particular.<sup>52</sup> Hategeka reckoned that half the population was Tutsi and that only a hundredth of them survived.<sup>53</sup> He owed the information on the genocide in Kibuye to Clément Mutuyemungu, one of the few survivors who managed to escape to the Idjwi Island in Lake Kivu and from there to Goma, where he met Hategeka. He subsequently became a seminarian in Belgium.<sup>54</sup> In an interview, Fabien Rakwareke, Hategeka's longtime companion, described him as a "free man."<sup>55</sup> This is also apparent in the manner in which he talked about the RPF, which achieved the conquest of Rwanda in mid-July 1994, putting an end to genocide, and embarked on the task of reconstructing the country. We have seen that he did not shy away from mentioning the killing of three Catholic bishops in Gakurazo near Byimana in the Giterama area. The "meditation" he dedicated to this episode is entitled "Sad news: the bloodbath of Byimana."

The motivation of this massacre has never been elucidated. All we can say is that one of the victims, Vincent Nsengiyumva, the archbishop of Kigali, was a staunch supporter of the Habyarimana regime and a personal friend of the deceased president and his family. There is no doubt that he attracted a lot of anger against himself from the genocide survivors.<sup>56</sup> Some say that the murders were decided at a high level of command in the RPF, others that it resulted from a lone initiative. Hategeka was aware of the dilemma. "We do not know," he wrote, "if it was a fatal accident or a cold calculation but, in any event, neither is worthy of man." It is clear, he continued that "innocent or compromised nobody deserved to perish in this fashion."<sup>57</sup>

Even more symptomatic of Hategeka's independence of mind is his "meditation" on the RPF's capture of Kigali: "Victorious army: Pyrrhus would cry less: the 19 July 1994." This page may have been written on the day of the event or shortly after. Instead of saluting the RPF's "triumph" and the beginning of a new era, Hategeka remained focused on the genocide. There was nothing to celebrate, he commented. It was a pyrrhic victory:

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52 Philip Verwimp, 'A quantitative analysis of genocide in Kibuye Prefecture, Rwanda', Centre for Economic Studies, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Discussions Paper Series (DPS) 01.10 (May 2001), 28. This is a conservative estimate. Other authors, using different calculation methods, give higher figures.

53 Hategeka, *Raisins verts*, 52-53.

54 Ibid., 53. See Clément Mutuyemungu's testimony in 'Les mensonges par omission de l'abbé Maindron', *Golias*, 48-49 (Summer 1996), 81.

55 Abbé Fabien Rwakareke, interview conducted in Gisenyi on 15 April 2024.

56 Denis, The genocide against the Tutsi and the Rwandan churches, 196-197.

57 Hategeka, *Raisins verts*, 50.

Pyrrhus had won a victory by losing as many men as his opponents. But the Rwandan Patriotic Front is in a worse position than Pyrrhus, because it has lost soldiers and civilians. Will this genocide be remembered as a temporary setback on the road to a just war? Just or not, it has caused the death of the non-combatants and the non-enlisted. ‘Rachel is weeping, uncontrollably,’ says the Scripture, ‘because her children are no more.’ The victory and the repatriation of the refugees will have thus cost too many lives. One will have to establish in what measure the gain was worth so many losses. Sometimes a victory is more to deplore than a defeat.

## The Faith Put to the Test

Hagegeka’s theological reflections on the horror and senselessness of the genocide are perhaps what will be most remembered from his book. His faith was put to the test, but he emerged from the ordeal as a stronger believer.

Strangely and, one may say, regrettably, there has been little theological reflection on the genocide against the Tutsi. A few survivors tried to make sense of it during or after the event in what can be called a “theology from below.”<sup>58</sup> Not much is found under the pen of trained theologians. Jean-Pierre Karegeye’s May 1999 article on “Genocide and Liturgy” in *La Nouvelle Relève*<sup>59</sup> is an exception. One could also cite Malachie Munyaneza’s reflections on “violence as institution in the religious experience”<sup>60</sup> and a recent book on theology in post-genocide Rwanda.<sup>61</sup> There is no shortage of studies, on the other hand, on forgiveness and reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda. Against this background, Hagegeka’s “meditations,” fragmentary as they are, deserve attention. He was at pain to put in words what the genocide, which he had experienced in his flesh, meant for him as a Christian. There is something similar in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison* in Nazi Germany.<sup>62</sup> In both cases, the work is full of gems but not systematically arranged.

Hagegeka personally experienced the silence of God. He went through what he called a “tunnel.” For him, however, such emptiness did not imply that God was absent. He was present, but in a way difficult to figure out. At the end of the day, the human story is a story of grace:

To feel fulfilled to the point that we give thanks, through and despite all the dereliction, who and how must we be? Mad, very mad, I thought. Believing that God’s silence does not demonstrate his indifference. But what a dark tunnel

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58 Denis, The genocide against the Tutsi and the Rwandan churches, 97-98.

59 Jean-Pierre Karegeye, ‘Génocide et liturgie’, *La Nouvelle Relève*, 384 (30 May 1999), 311-312.

60 Malachie Munyaneza, Violence as Institution in African Religious Experience’, *Contagion. Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture*, 8, 2001, 39-68.

61 Marcel Uwineza (ed.), *Reinventing Theology in Post-Genocide Rwanda: Challenges and Hopes*, Washington, DC, Georgetown University Press, 2023.

62 Hagegeka mentioned Bonhoeffer in *Raisins verts*, 41, as an example of resistance to the tyranny of lie and cynicism.

! For Camus, silence is equivalent to non-existence.<sup>63</sup>

In a “meditation” which seems to have been written when he was in hiding, Hategeka declared that patience and courage, the two virtues one needs in adversity, are incompatible with despair. Hence this definition of hope:

Only the one who hopes can touch what is not yet palpable, swim towards a distant shore, tear out the teeth of destiny. To hope is to believe that after the night dawn will break, because hope is patient and courageous, knowing that ‘the story is not finished’.<sup>64</sup>

Can God be freed from the responsibility of the genocide? The title of the “meditation” related to this question is telling: “To the pain there is no explanation that holds water.” Various theodicies, Hategeka wrote, quoting Emmanuel Levinas’ *Entre nous*,<sup>65</sup> try to find metaphysical or ethical justifications for evil, such as a *plan d’ensemble* (comprehensive plan) or the necessity to atone for sin. These explanations are not very helpful:

We can, of course, wonder whether theodicy in the broad and narrow sense of the term actually succeeds in exonerating God or in saving morality in the name of faith or in making suffering bearable and what is the true intention of the thought which resorts to theodicy.<sup>66</sup>

In one of the most insightful passages of the book, Hategeka addressed, in echo to the psalmist’s question, the problem of God’s silence. “Where is your God?” (Ps 41,4). This led him to discuss the issue of God’s almighty. If God is almighty, why should I, who worship him and respect him, suffer so much? The answer is that God is not almighty or rather that he chose not to be almighty by allowing his son Jesus to be put to death. In similar circumstances, Bonhoeffer had reached the same conclusion. God shares the suffering of his creatures.

The alternative, Hategeka argued, would be to say that if God did not save the Tutsi, it was because he had chosen the side of their enemies. They would be two gods, one for the Tutsi and one for the Hutu. God would be ethnicised:

But what should the Creator have done? Free your protégés by annihilating their murderers! He would have shown himself to be omnipotent in our favour. And we imagine that the tragedy would be less. But two gods would have to be involved in the conflict: that of the victims and that of the killers. Polytheism is a kind of atheism, it is a temptation to metaphysical fetishism, a product of distress. In this case, the killers do not kill him any more than the victims. Truly, he was cut down in the dead and he did

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63 Hategeka, *Raisins verts*, 33.

64 Ibid., 35.

65 Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre nous. Essais sur le penser-à-l’autre* (Paris : Éditions de l’Herne, 1991). English translation: *Entre nous. Thinking of the other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

66 Levinas, *Entre nous*, 151, quoted in Hategeka, *Raisins verts*, 16.

not survive in their murderers. We dare to hope that faith prevails over death among the victims, a faith stronger than rational systems.<sup>67</sup>

This was not an academic discussion. There are multiple testimonies about *génocidaires* who claimed, before putting their victims to death, that God had “abandoned” them. For them, there was no doubt that God (or Jesus or the Virgin Mary) had taken sides. He had favoured, once and for all, the “liberation” of the Hutu from the “slavery” imposed on them by the Tutsi. He may have favoured the Tutsi during colonial times, but now this time was over. The ill-famed Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines repeated this message *ad nauseam*.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

Neither in Rwanda nor in Italy has his work enjoyed the reputation it deserved. It would be hard to find an author who, having gone through the trauma of the genocide against the Tutsi and miraculously survived, articulated as clearly the sentiments—amazement, sadness, outrage, hope, faith—that this traumatic experience provoked in him. Hagegeka was well-read. The authors he quoted, Emmanuel Levinas and Colette Braeckman in particular, helped him to consolidate his argumentation. He performed a theological act in the full sense of the term: finding words to express what is beyond words. In retrospect, one can only regret Hagegeka’s absence from the Rwandan scene after July 1994. Among the priests who remained in the country and in the laity, there was a great willingness to acknowledge the reality of the genocide and draw lessons from it, with the hierarchy being more hesitant. If *Raisins verts* had not been published in Italy and had been distributed in Rwanda and beyond, the quality of the public debate, in church and society, might have been more solid. Thirty years or so after the genocide, it is time to recognise the human, moral, and spiritual value of Hagegeka’s meditations, written under extremely difficult circumstances in a spirit of courage, faith, and hope.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>68</sup> Denis, The Genocide against the Tutsi and the Rwandan Churches, 93–97.

<sup>1</sup>Des rescapés du diocèse de Nyundo témoignent\*, *Dialogue*, 177 (August-September 1994), 59–68.

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